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ABSTRACT

The development of new communications technology is likely to transform everyday life in the coming decades, and a central question for educators is whether and how such technologies can be used to advance the education of both the historically disenfranchised and of those who are already educated but desire or need more education. In an effort to meet the challenge of the video revolution, Luzerne County Community College (LCCC) launched a program in fall 1981 entitled "Telecollege," which offered 85 adults the opportunity to earn college credits through study at home. The possibility of the program was conceived by the Director of Learning Resources, who brought the potential uses of the new technology to the college's attention. Later, instructional television options were examined by an institutional task force and links were established with a local Public Broadcasting System (PBS) affiliate, which was planning to offer four telecourses. The Assistant to the Academic Dean was charged with specific responsibilities related to offering these PBS courses for college credit, including establishing and maintaining communication with PBS affiliates, institutional administrators and faculty, and the telecourse administrator and making arrangements for facilities, texts, and mail-in registration. After outlining aspects of program development, this paper concludes by examining alternate modes of program evaluation and areas where telecourse instruction might be expanded. (HB)

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by Eleanor Miller

Luzerne County Community College

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STARTING A TELECOURSE PROGRAM

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We have been witness to, in our own lifetime, three distinct epochs in the history of western culture. The shift from a predominantly agrarian lifestyle to an industrialized society has led to a new era of technology in which information systems will impact, in untold ways, on the quality of life of future generations.

It is predicted that over the next two decades, a communications explosion will result in you and I owning home computers, videodiscs, videocassette recorders and interactive video equipment. While these predictions are speculative, the implications of the telecommunications revolution for educators have already begun to manifest themselves. Lorraine Matusak notes in New Directions for Experiential Learning, "A central concern for educators is whether and how such technologies can be used to advance the education of both the historically disenfranchised and those already educated but wishing for or needing more education."[1] She noted that a subcommittee of the National Academy of Sciences evaluated telecommunications services during the 1980s and confirmed the feasibility, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of using technology for the instruction of long-distance learners. On this basis, it would appear that the time for educators to chart their plans to develop high-quality, supplementary alternatives to classroom instruction for adult learners is NOW before industry usurps that function!

In the first stage of its efforts to meet the challenge of the video revolution, Luzerne County Community College launched a program entitled

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[1] Lorraine Matusak, New Directions for Experiential Learning, Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco, No. 14, December 1981, p.136.

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"TeleCollege" in the Fall of 1981. In its inaugural semester, the program offered eighty-five adult learners the opportunity to earn college credit in the convenience and privacy of their own homes. Did the initial "experiment" prove worthwhile? This question may be answered in the analysis of the conceptualization, exploration, implementation, evaluation, and expansion of the TeleCollege program which follows:

Conceptualization: Every program which functions and grows through the efforts of cooperation and teamwork can trace its roots to one individual. At Luzerne County Community College, the TeleCollege concept was borne of Mr. Robert Cohee, Director of Learning Resources, whose nurturing during its infancy was essential in order for the program to reach eventual fruition. Mr. Cohee's media expertise enabled him to recognize the implications of the telecommunications revolution for colleges and universities, and his foresight compelled him to bring to the college's attention creative applications and uses of the new technology.

Exploration. Although federal grants enabled the college, in the 1970s, to secure video production and distribution equipment and to establish a studio and control room in the audio visual section of the library, encouragement by the media staff through in-service presentations did not engender an enthusiastic response to the use of the equipment and facilities. The practical issue of lack of availability of time and money committed to development of creative video projects constituted what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. In an effort to address such issues and obstacles, an Instructional Television Task Force was established in May 1980 upon the recommendation of Mr. Cohee which was comprised of faculty, administrative and general staff representation. The objectives of the Task Force were threefold: 1)the investigation of instructional television vehicles such as telecourses; 2)the exploration of outlets for televised instruction; 3) the consideration of the advantages of institutional participation in various telecommunications consortia.

In February of 1981, it was learned that the local Public Broadcasting System affiliate was planning to offer four telecourses in conjunction with the National Public Broadcasting Service Adult Learning Program. The local PBS affiliate invited Luzerne County Community College to participate in a consortium of colleges the registrants and prospective enrollees of which are served by the television station. This opportunity lent a sense of urgency to the Task Force's investigation and a decision was made to forego the usual feasibility study which is conducted when an innovative program is being considered for implementation. Upon procurement of administrative and faculty support and of data from producers and distributors of telecourses as well as from colleges offering telecourses, a committment was made to offer, for college credit, the telecourses scheduled for broadcast by the local PBS affiliate in the Fall 1981 semester.

Implementation. During the investigative period, a consultant to LCCC indicated that the person charged with implementation of telecourses should be one who could be counted upon to devote not only days but also evenings and weekends to the unending demands of a program dealing with constantly-changing schedules, continuous exploration of new courses and creative ways of presenting them, continual development of promotional materials, updating of faculty and student handbooks, and the host of meetings, both on campus and off campus that are required to run a telecourse program (not to mention the daily duties one must attend to if one is charged with other responsibilities in addition to a consuming one such as development of telecourses.) The consultant did not exaggerate! As Assistant to the Academic Dean, I was charged with the implementation of telecourses, and even the invaluable assistance and cooperation of Mr. Cohee and his media staff did not preclude the necessity of my devoting many evenings and weekends to getting the program off to a smooth start. In

addition to precursory activities of implementation described heretofore, specific activities which bear mentioning are:

a. Communications between PBS affiliate and telecourse administrator to arrange preview of videotape segments of courses and preview of literature such as texts and study guides by both telecourse administrator and faculty chairpersons.

b. Meetings with institutional administrators to effect and affirm committments to telecourse leases, promotional costs, consortia membership fees, faculty remuneration, equipment and supplies, and personnel requirements.

c. Meetings with faculty members to arrange course assignments, time and location of orientation sessions, welcome letters to students, and evaluation of telecourses.

d. Arrangements for promotion and marketing of telecourses including design and distribution of brochures and posters, public-speaking appearances before community groups and organizations, newspaper articles and advertisements, radio talk-show interviews and televised ads.

e. Arrangements with college bookstore manager for order and sale of study guides and texts as well as for accommodation of homebound students who may require purchase of text materials through the mail.

f. Arrangements with registrar for convenient mail-in registration in addition to in-person enrollment.

g. Arrangements for a designated area of the college where telecourse mid-term and final exams may be available for completion on the basis of a flexible schedule, and arrangements for an area in which telecourse students may view a televised segment which they missed or which they feel the need to review for reinforcement.

h. Constant interaction of the telecourse administrator with the media staff, and with faculty members and students. This can be accomplished through frequent written communications and telephone calls.

Evaluation. The assessment of a telecourse program may be accomplished through a variety of means. First, the distribution of an evaluation instrument to both students and faculty can provide immediate feedback regarding many aspects of the program. It should be noted that the instrument must be designed, specifically, for the non-traditional mode of learning which telecourses represent. A student evaluation instrument administered to students enrolled in traditional classroom courses may not be applicable, nor easily adaptable, to telecourse evaluation. In addition to the study of evaluation instruments, analysis of grade distributions and of rate of course completion versus rate of attrition may provide clues to measuring the successfulness of the program.

If the objectives of the program included the attraction of new students and reduction of attrition, and if the program accomplished those objectives, it may be concluded that the program has provided a viable option for adult learners. This conclusion is reinforced if registrants, in the process of evaluating their experience in telecourses, express a high degree of satisfaction and a willingness to re-enroll in telecourses.

Expansion. While the excitement of the video revolution impels us forward, the monetary investment in a yet-to-be proven mode of delivering adult education services compels us to proceed with caution. At LCCC we have, in the past six months, acquired an earth satellite reception unit which will enable us to receive programming broadcast by the Appalachian Community Service Network (ACSN), a not-for-profit agency for the satellite distribution of educational programming. The satellite reception unit will allow us not only to receive and record credit and non-credit courses, but it will also permit the reception and interactive

participation in nationwide teleconferences at our new educational conference center. In addition to offering the PBS telecourses which are available to us in the fall and spring semesters, we are investigating the long-range leasing of telecourses directly from their producers which will make possible their utilization during the summer sessions when they will not be scheduled through PBS. Through our membership in the Eastern Educational Consortium (EEC), we will also have available to us, for lease on a semester basis, courses that may not be available to us via PBS. We are exploring new and different means for utilization of such telecourses such as implementation at industrial sites and prisons, for example. Also, we are seeking the interest of cable television (CATV) companies in scheduling telecourses for the benefit of their viewing audience; and, we are investigating the possibilities of acquiring our own low-power television station or Instructional Television Fixed Services (ITFS) system which would allow us to disseminate programs of our choice at our discretion.

In summation, if our "experiment" proves unsuccessful, it will not be for lack of committment. It is my belief that, unlike the early "talking head" version of instructional television which manifested itself prematurely, the new, sophisticated approach of the 1980s to instructional television is very much in synch with the times. The coincidence of the video revolution with the increased demand for training and re-training of adults is a "marriage made in heaven" for proliferation of telecourses.

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